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ABSTRACT

This paper takes the position that "the general phenomenon of meta-disciplinarity should find a place in contemporary investigations into the organization and production of knowledge." In the meta-disciplinary triad of art, science, and the humanities, the humanities originated out of a distinction between the human and the divine. The history of the humanities meta-discipline from early factors such as the re-emergence of classical texts and the degradation of medieval Scholasticism and the extra-intellectual factors including economics, social change, political power, institutional development, and psychological formations. The paper also raises questions about the relationship of inquiries into values and worth raised by the humanities and those of theology, biblical studies, and other descendants of the divinities. It is suggested that investigation of the real motive powers and structuring influences behind discipline formation should be carried out with respect to the meta-disciplines of science and art as well. (Contains 16 references.) (MAH)

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TOWARD AN INVESTIGATION OF METADISCIPLINARITY: A PROVOCATION IN THE HUMANITIES

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TOWARD AN INVESTIGATION OF METADISCIPLINARITY: A PROVOCATION IN THE HUMANITIES

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Recent scholarship in disciplinarity has disclosed the complex interplay of social, political, institutional, economic and psychological forces involved in discipline formation. (e.g., Messer-Davidow, Shumway, and Sylvan, 1993) We have come to realize that practices are at least as important as theories in defining disciplines, and that institutional niches predominate over personal charisma in defining the conditions under which disciplines appear. Power has been revealed to be intimately linked with knowledge in the birth of disciplines, as elsewhere. This investigation into the real motive powers and structuring influences behind discipline formation should carried out with respect to the meta-disciplines, as well.

In the United States, at least, and in large measure elsewhere, all knowledge (to paraphrase Julius Caesar) is divided into three parts: the sciences, the arts, and the humanities. Together with "the professions," they comprehensively organize academic knowledge and practice. These large groupings of disciplines - what I am calling "meta-disciplines" - provide the internal structure of most American universities. In fact, when the Encyclopaedia Britannica attempts to define "humanities," it begins by identifying them as "one of the broadest administrative divisions . . ." of American universities (Unattributed, 1979, p. 200)

As one of the three branches of "colleges of arts and sciences," the humanities make up one portion of breadth requirements built into most curricula. This curricular form expresses the general agreement that all educated persons should have some knowledge of "the sciences, the arts, and the humanities." Within these meta-disciplines, usually no further distinctions are made with respect to general education. A biology course is as good as a physics course, for these purposes, since the goal is an understanding of "science," a general exemplified by any of its particulars; so a history course is just as good as a literature course or a philosophy course, since the goal is an understanding of "the humanities."

Whether a discipline is a "science," or an "art," or a "humanity," is of more than academic interest. It structures sources of funding (e.g., the NSF, NEA, NEH).[1] It shapes the role the discipline and its knowledge can (or must) play in political life. For example, so-called conservative Christian groups seek the mantle of science for "creation science," while railing against the evils of "secular humanism." Moreover, the three meta-disciplines have distinct aims, with the sciences pursuing knowledge, the arts creativity, and the humanities values.

Perhaps equally importantly, the meta-disciplines define the universes of discourse to which particular discursive practices can belong. One can pursue psychology as a science or as a humanity; linguistics is a scientific study of language, while literature is humanistic; the study of literature is a humanity but its creation is an art. Thus these three great meta-disciplines structure our thinking about thinking and organize the practice of our practices. Like Foucault's *episteme*

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[1]This applies to other sources of funding, as well, be they foundations, corporations, or private sources. Metadisciplinary identification also affects distribution of other resources, such as professional associations and advancement, publishing opportunities, and so forth.

they enable some questions to be asked while making others impossible even to imagine. (Foucault, 1973, p. xix-xxi and *passim*)

But what are the humanities? Who is a humanist? What makes up humanism? Why should it form such a definitive triumvirate with science and art in the intellectual life of our culture?

It is easy enough to reply that the humanities deal with what is most distinctly human, not as a matter of physical fact (as in human biology), but in terms of what is humane - of what distinguishes us as free and intelligent creatures from the brute realm of beasts, that a humanist is one who studies and cultivates what is humane, that the humanities study what is distinctly **human** about human being. Thus it naturally forms a triad with science (the study of predictable fact) and art (the practice of creative making).

Since the nineteenth century, and certainly today, the humanities are most often contrasted with the sciences. Dilthey and Rickert, in the 19th century, were among the very first to attempt to establish arenas of knowledge concerning humans that are necessarily beyond the reach of the natural sciences. (Gusdorf, 1979, p. 1180) More recent work attempts to further divide these human studies into "sciences" of the human (social science) and humanities proper.

However, the foundation of the humanities lies in the distinction between the human and the divine, rather than between the human and the natural. The Renaissance humanists contrasted the *studia humanitatis* with the *studia divinitas*. The humanities were four hundred years old before the contrast with the sciences was born. Humanists first placed **humans** at the center of intellectual concern in contrast with the divinities, which placed **God** at the center of all things. This contrast is not merely intellectual, but has its roots in the political, economic and social systems that made the humanists (and, therefore, humanism) possible.[2]

Who were these early humanists? How and why did they emerge as significant factors in Western intellectual developments? What were the institutional, economic, social and political factors implicated in the scaffolding of the humanities' construction? While a brief excursus such as this cannot hope to fully explore these questions, some discussion of them may prove enlightening and, even, provocative.

Some wish to claim that Humanism began in classical Greece, was submerged in medieval times only to be reborn with the rest of classical culture in the Italian Renaissance. This claim, however, is tendentious and mythological, expressing humanism's creation story, but not its history. The sophists were no more humanists than Aristotle was a physicist, nor was Cicero, although humanists can find sources in sophistry and Cicero, as physics can in Aristotle.

Humanism actually finds its beginnings in early Renaissance Italy. Petrarch is often held to be the first distinctly humanist scholar, being contrasted with his older contemporary Dante, held to be the last of the medievals.

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[2]Bruce Kuklick claims that, "The emergence of the humanities in the United States has little to do with the anti-orthodox secular impulse associated with Renaissance humanism." (1990, p. 203) While this may or not be the case, it is improbable that the humanities would have arisen in the United States without an existing humanistic tradition on which to draw. In any event, a thorough discussion of the rise of the humanities in the Unites States would require a history of the meta-discipline, which if far beyond the scope of this paper.

> Morally Dante was concerned primarily with being theologically right; Petrarch and those who followed him cared for the enrichment of the human mind and conscience. (Whitfield, 1979, p. 161)

At the outset of humanism, Petrarch established a secular genealogy, creating a figure of St. Augustine who drew from Cicero and other classical figures and whose sources are expunged of Biblical and Christian writings. In doing so he establishes the sacred character of humanistic sources and interpretive practices, indeed with the help of a great saint of the church, but without reference to traditional sources of Christian authority, including, even, Christ! (Quillen, 1992, p. 206 and *passim*.)

Petrarch, like those who followed him, owed his economic well-being to the new capitalist class. He was the son of a notary, while Latini was a notary, Villani and Saccheti were well-to-do merchants, and Boccaccio and Sercambi were children of rich merchants. (Hauser, 1951, vol. 2, p. 80) Although many humanists soon were derived from the lower classes, all were dependent on the new secular wealth for their livelihood. Moreover, the humanists were overwhelmingly from cities and towns, representing the new urban classes.

> The Renaissance was . . . the jealously guarded possession of a highbrow and Latinized elite. . . associated with the humanistic and Neoplatonic movement - a uniform and, on the whole, like-minded intelligensia such as, for example, the clergy, taken as a totality, had never been. (Hauser, 1951, vol. 2, p. 51)

Medieval culture was, at least in spirit, continuous from the most to the least educated. Cathedrals, after all, were "Bibles of the masses," while Renaissance art, provided intellectual respectability by the humanists, was aimed at a small elite. The Renaissance manifested an intention to create a culture belonging to an exclusive elite and intentionally unintelligible to the uninitiated. (Hauser, 1951, vol. 2, p. 51) A humanistic education was the key to initiation.

While medieval Latin derived from the organic ties of the church to late Roman times, the humanists wrote in a new Latin, closer indeed to the Roman language, but, again, available only to those with an education in the classics - that is, a humanistic education. The humanists purged Latin of the effects of a thousand years of living use, which they viewed as corruption. (Fumaroli, 1988, p. 144)

> [They] wanted to break with the popular tendencies of the Middle Ages and the different national languages in which they were expressed, and to create a cultural monopoly for themselves as a kind of new priestly caste." (Hauser, 1951, vol. 2, p. 51)

For the Humanists, classical culture became a kind of "second sacred history." (Gusdorf, 1979, p. 1176). Ficino celebrated a yearly "saint's day" at his villa dedicated to Plato! (Fumaroli, 1988, p. 146) Lorenzo Valla's *Elegant Linguae Latinae* apparently attempts to demonstrate that classical texts have the ability to awaken primary truth without reference to Christian revelation. (Fisher, 1993, p. 321) For the humanists, the aim of human life was no longer seen as the imitation of Christ, but the achievement of perfected human nature. Man became the measure of all things. Renaissance humanism celebrated the sacrosanct worth of man. (Gusdorf, 1979, p. 1176) Of course, many early humanists were also Christians, but a new kind of Christian. The Catholic Erasmus wanted to canonize Socrates, implicitly associating him with Christ. This "implied a profound alteration in the traditional image of Christ, as well as a new reading of the gospel - often in a Platonic spirit." (Gusdorf, 1979, p. 1176) In keeping with this transformation,

late Gothic and Renaissance depictions of Christ decisively move away from His Divinity to portray His humanity. (Dillenberger, p. 75-127, 1988)

Humanists depended on the patronage of the courts of the new principalities and on the patronage of influential citizens for whom they worked as secretaries or tutors. They drew salaries and pensions from the state. The newly powerful secular elite viewed humanists as one of the many costly expenses of keeping up an elegant household. Renaissance gentlemen of private means kept humanists as the wealthy had once kept court singers, fools, panegyrists or historians. (Hauser, 1951, vol. 2, p. 81) In return for their keep, the humanists were expected to provide their keepers with an aura of intellectual nobility.

The secular and bourgeois aristocracy could not have purchased this ennoblement from churchman scholars, nor could their private or political interests have been furthered from doctrines tied to the church. Humanism, with its emphasis on the human, in contrast to the divine, fitted perfectly with the aristocracies' desire to become centers of power distinct from, and in many respects over against, the church. These centers of power were something new in the West, neither hereditary aristocracies nor bishoprics and monasteries, but secular principalities. When Macchiavelli, himself a humanist, wrote **The Prince**, he was investigating conditions of power with which no one was well versed, especially not the princes themselves.

While the humanists wrote in retainer to, and in a sense on behalf of, the new princes and other secular aristocrats, they wrote to an audience composed almost exclusively of elements that had gained wealth and influence through the rise of capitalism (Hauser, 1951, vol. 2, p. 80-81) While medieval scholasticists addressed a small audience, most of whom were known to the writers, the humanists addressed a larger, anonymous audience, whose attitudes, economic behaviors and political actions were crucial to the well-being of the humanists' retainers. Humanist literati depended on the existence of a literate bourgeois class, albeit a small one.

Not only did they depend on this class, they played a key role in its creation and growth. From its outset, humanism was an educational as much as an intellectual program. The early humanists adopted the ancient Greek notion of *paidea* and its Latin counterpart *humanitas*. The study of Greco-Roman rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy was supposed to bring out, train, and intensify what is most distinctly human. The humanists' educational program concentrated on non-scriptural sources. (Bird, 1979, p. 1178) Although the divines might be expert in Biblical matters, the humanists predominated in classical matters, again providing a secular counterweight for the humanists' sponsors. They, as recipients of a humanistic education, could lay claim to moral superiority as the "most humane" of people. With the overthrow of Scholasticism, "sanctification by means of culture now tended to replace the religious sanctification." (Gusdorf, 1979, p. 1176)

As patrons, the recipients of humanistic education provided the market for works of art memorializing pagan themes, and created the background that led to a later European culture with classical and other pagan subjects, a culture represented by Shakespeare (Julius Caesar, A Midsummer Night's Dream), Monteverde (Orfeo), Corneille, Goethe (Iphigenia) and so forth.

The humanists articulated a new notion of the ideal type of person, the *homo universale* (universal man). This master of philology, art and creativity, endowed with encyclopedic genius, was brought into being by humanistic scholarship. (Gusdorf, 1979, p. 1176) "The knowledge of humanistic scholarship was the privileged path to spiritual formation . . . Apprenticeship to the

ancient languages became the surrogate for ascetic monasticism." (Ibid., see also Fumaroli, 1988, p. 142)

The humanists served and were supported by principalities, mercantile households, and the burgeoning bourgeoisie. It was they who received the humanistic education, became the new type of ideal human being, and bore sanctification by culture. These were the first exemplars of "the modern type of cultivated man, distinguishable by the fact that in his youth, he had visited the imaginary museum of the masterpieces of art." (Ibid.)

This new human was celebrated as possessing an inviolable and intrinsic worth. He assumed attributes formerly reserved for divinity, especially the power of creativity, and he was praised for making himself his own most excellent creation. This was, in fact, the humanists assessment of their own highest achievement: by means of their educational program and the studies associated with it to raise to its highest level man's self-development. This spirit inflames, for example, *De Dignitate et excellentia hominis* (Giannozzo Manetti, 1452) and *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (Pico della Mirandola, 1486). (Ibid.)

Humanism was born as a meta-discipline, incorporating a number of new and existing disciplines: philology, the appreciation and criticism of the arts, grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, moral philosophy and classical studies. This new meta-discipline had meta-objectives - no less, in fact, than the creation of a new kind of human being, one more aligned with the "true" nature and real capacities of the species

Small wonder that the Council of Trent (1545) marked the beginning of the persecution of humanists among the higher clergy, and that the Roman Catholic Church as a whole decisively turned its back on humanism and, in fact, on the Renaissance as a whole. The Council of Trent openly and self-consciously acted to reassert the institutional authority of the Church in all aspects: economic, political and social as well as religious and spiritual. As a part of this, the divinities reasserted their unique nature and privilege, insisting that, indeed, the human is not the measure of all things, that God is the center of appropriate human knowledge, that only through Christ can the new human be created, and that the Church (now clearly distinguished from the state) is the institutional locus of knowledge, education, and power.

The birth of the humanities as a meta-discipline displays all the earmarks we are coming to associate with the process of discipline formation, in which economics, social change, political power, institutional development, and new psychological formations go hand in hand with cognitive developments, intellectual practices and educational policies. The humanists became potent cultural forces in the West in relationship with and largely as a result of extra-intellectual factors. These factors include the rise of independent city-states in Italy; the developing urban bourgeoisie; increased literacy among this class; the desire of the bourgeoisie to educated themselves and their children well, yet outside the entrenched Church structures; and the existence of entrenched power in the Church, manifest in its control of knowledge/power in the form of the divinities and engendering the need of the new political centers for a counterweight to this power/knowledge, coupled with the appearance of educated individuals with the economic and psychological resources to move outside the Church and ally themselves with alternative institutions. One might also include here the challenge presented to Christian self-esteem by resurgent Islam.

No doubt, intellectual factors played their roles, as well. These factors include not only

the appearance of Greek and Latin texts in Western Europe, but also the long, slow, but eventually profound degradation of medieval Scholasticism. Even these factors, though, are tied to the broad sociological and economic forces from which the new, secular centers of economic and political power derive. It was, after all, European Christians who sacked Constantinople, and it was the fall of the Eastern Empire that sent Byzantine scholars to Italy with their chests full of classical texts. The fall of Constantinople was part and parcel of the process by which the Crusades, as well as other factors, concentrated economic wealth in Italian ports among the hands of merchants, traders and shipowners, thus giving rise to the independent urban states and their magnates from whose estates humanism emerged.

Given the significance of extra-intellectual factors in the rise of the humanities meta-discipline, similar investigations might fruitfully be taken into science and art, the other two great meta-disciplines of the Euro-American intellectual tradition. Certainly a good deal of groundwork has been done in both areas, probably more than on the humanities.

"Science," in particular, must be situated in two significant contexts. The first is the subjugation and domination of the female and the feminine, incorporating bodies, nature, and women themselves. The second is the support of the scientific enterprise by the growing, largely Protestant industrial and pre-industrial classes in Europe.[3]

The first set of connections has been outlined in a preliminary fashion by Caroline Merchant in The Death of Nature. Francis Bacon was both a founder of science and a skilled inquisitor of witches. His rhetoric concerning the relationship of scientist to nature is remarkably to his rhetoric concerning that of inquisitor to witch, suggesting that science has unexplored roots in the institutionalization of new gender constructions in European culture. (1980, pp. 168 -169)

The second set of connections suggests that the image of "pure" science, conducted without respect to its practical and economic consequences, may always have been more an ideological act of self-justification and less an actual description of scientific activity.

"Art" as a metadiscipline was formed after humanism, but within the same time frame, a good deal sooner than "science." Many of the formative institutional contexts of art resemble those discussed above in relation to the humanities. Yet while the humanists played an important role in the formation of "the arts," significant differences in the contexts giving rise to the two metadisciplines should not be overlooked. Before the Renaissance there was no presumption of the unity of the arts, and there was no association of the visual arts with poetry. The formation of the metadiscipline "arts" is connected to the transformation of painting and sculpture from manual to intellectual activities - from labor to creativity. This, in turn, is linked to the weakening of the guilds and basic changes in the master/apprentice relationship, which may itself be coupled with the rise of an urban working class and the beginnings of proletarianization.

Since metadisciplines are neither natural nor metaphysical, but historical and cultural, they transform and, even, fall out of existence and are replaced. Perhaps our time of rapid economic, political, social and cultural change may, like the Renaissance, be one of metadiscipline formation. No individual could possibly forecast the actual course of metadisciplinary formation, but there are a number of contemporary developments that resemble aspects of previous processes linked

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[3]Indeed the early proto-scientists had a greater debt to humanism that has been widely appreciated. See Blair and Grafton, 1992.

with the rise of metadisciplines

One such development is the appearance of transnational corporations. These large scale economic institutions have complex needs and interests (over against nation-states, national and regional cultures, and nationally, regionally or locally defined economic centers) which may lead them to develop their own castes or classes of intellectual workers.[4] Increasing percentages of higher education in the United States are being provided by corporations, bypassing and competing with traditional purveyors such as colleges and universities. Could it be that we are seeing the beginnings of new socio-economic relations leading to a new intellectual class?

Another development, perhaps contradictory to the first, is the reassertion of local cultural identities. Each cultural nexus has its own, historical institutional forms for carrying out intellectual work. Whether the Islamic *madrasa*, the Native American tribal teacher, or the Chinese Confucian center, these forms are being reestablished, transformed both by their long contact with Western universities and by the contemporary situations and problems which they must address. Nevertheless, they are unique intellectual, social, political and economic structures, distinct from Euro-American universities and colleges, and, increasingly, they are significant forces on the world scene.

Another factor that may reshape our intellectual landscape is the nature of the issues that command our attention. Ecological survival suggests establishing colleges of the "ecologies," which would put at the center of value and interest the well-being of self-sustaining biological communities which include humans. These colleges might include biology and some aspects of chemistry, but not physics, while including process (but not analytic) philosophy, and incorporating waste disposal and waste-stream reduction along with arboriculture, public policy, and some aspects of anthropology.

The increasing concentration of our species in cities and the pressing nature of urban problems might give rise to colleges of "urbanities." These Colleges might incorporate disciplines of energy use and conservation; conflict resolution; sciences investigating the relationship between early childhood experience, brain chemistry and behavioral propensities (particularly to violence), architecture and environmental design; some aspects of the current disciplines of psychology, sociology, political science, and anthropology; epidemiology, and so forth.

The expanding intensity of our cross-cultural contacts might give rise to colleges of "ethnicities." These colleges, perhaps under the sponsorship of transnational economic entities, might incorporate structures and disciplines derived not only from EuroAmerican intellectual practices, but from Islamic *madrasas* and so forth. These metadisciplines would organize disciplines whose overall task is to investigate the nature of ethnicity, the processes by which it is defined and transmitted, its effects on experience and identity, and those means and methods by which people can sustain received ethnicity while interacting with and respecting differing ethnicities.

In conclusion, it seems clear that the general phenomenon of meta-disciplinarity should find a place in contemporary investigations into the organization and production of knowledge. Moreover, our understanding of the humanities should become marked with deeper appreciation

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[4]These corporations may be the institutional incubators for a global culture, or for competing, non-geographic cultures

of the extra-intellectual factors that made humanism a dynamic force in Western culture, a marking that would clarify the shaping roles of power, prestige, economic security and social status advancement (rather than human virtue) in the humanities. Finally, it is time to ask whether the human truly belongs at the center of inquiries into value and worth, or whether the Academy can leave this debate to the humanities, on the one hand, and to theology, biblical studies, and other descendants of the divinities, on the other. If the human is at the heart of this discourse, we must further ask whether any contemporary idea of the human is adequate to inhabit that heart.

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